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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Simplicity

by

Angela Jill Stickell

November 5, 1996

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Introduction

My thesis work is intended to be part of an ongoing polemic concerning the value of modernism. Modernism occurred at a time in history when craft, industrial design and architectural design were enjoying reciprocal influences. Many architects were translating their architectural value systems into object designs, many of which became landmarks of twentieth century design. This crossover between the fields, which is evidenced still today, produced a rich theoretic tradition from which to draw. I am convinced that architectural design and object design are invariably linked and this is reflected in my thesis works as well as in my thesis paper.

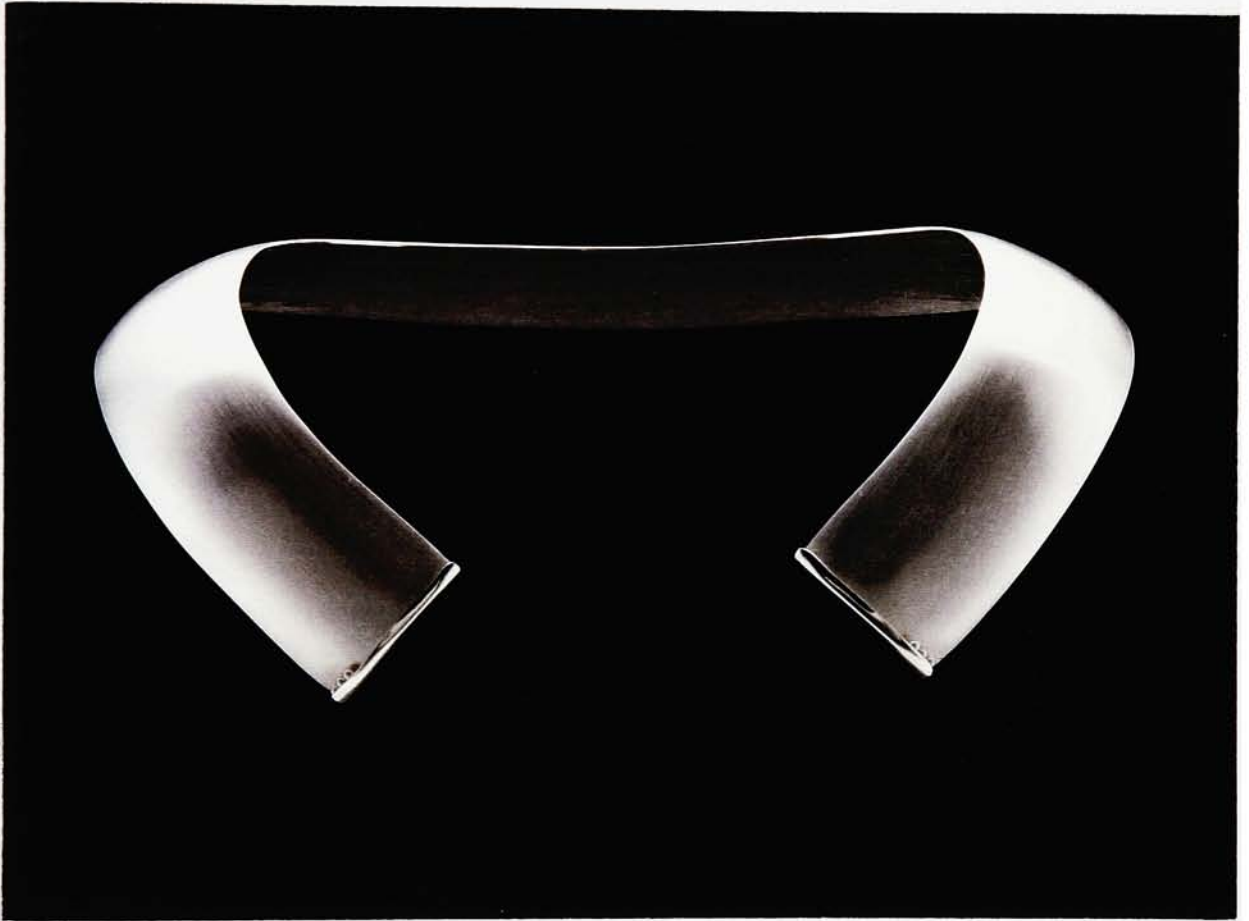
My thesis work was created within the framework of surface versus point. Three neckpieces (illus. 1, 2 ,3), two of which I completed the year preceding the thesis year, focused my attention on how powerful an object can be when viewed against a neutral palate and convinced me of the appropriateness of minimalism as a response to the chaos of our daily reality. The pieces strive for a severe elegance and purity of form which not only contrasts the “messy vitality” of our daily lives, but is neutral enough to allow for individual idiosyncrasies.

The kind of restraint this requires is challenging. There is a piece within my thesis work, the third spoon of the spoon series (illus. 4), which cannot be defined in the reductive framework I have chosen to work in. I was affected by an article

in which the author suggested that minimalist designers reduced design to such a degree that it was non-descript. He posed the question of whether they were designing at all. It was an intimidating notion at the time, but having reflected on my work, I am convinced that restraint is difficult but **not** limiting. I am steadfast in my belief that my work will be stronger by maintaining the stringent parameters I have established for myself.

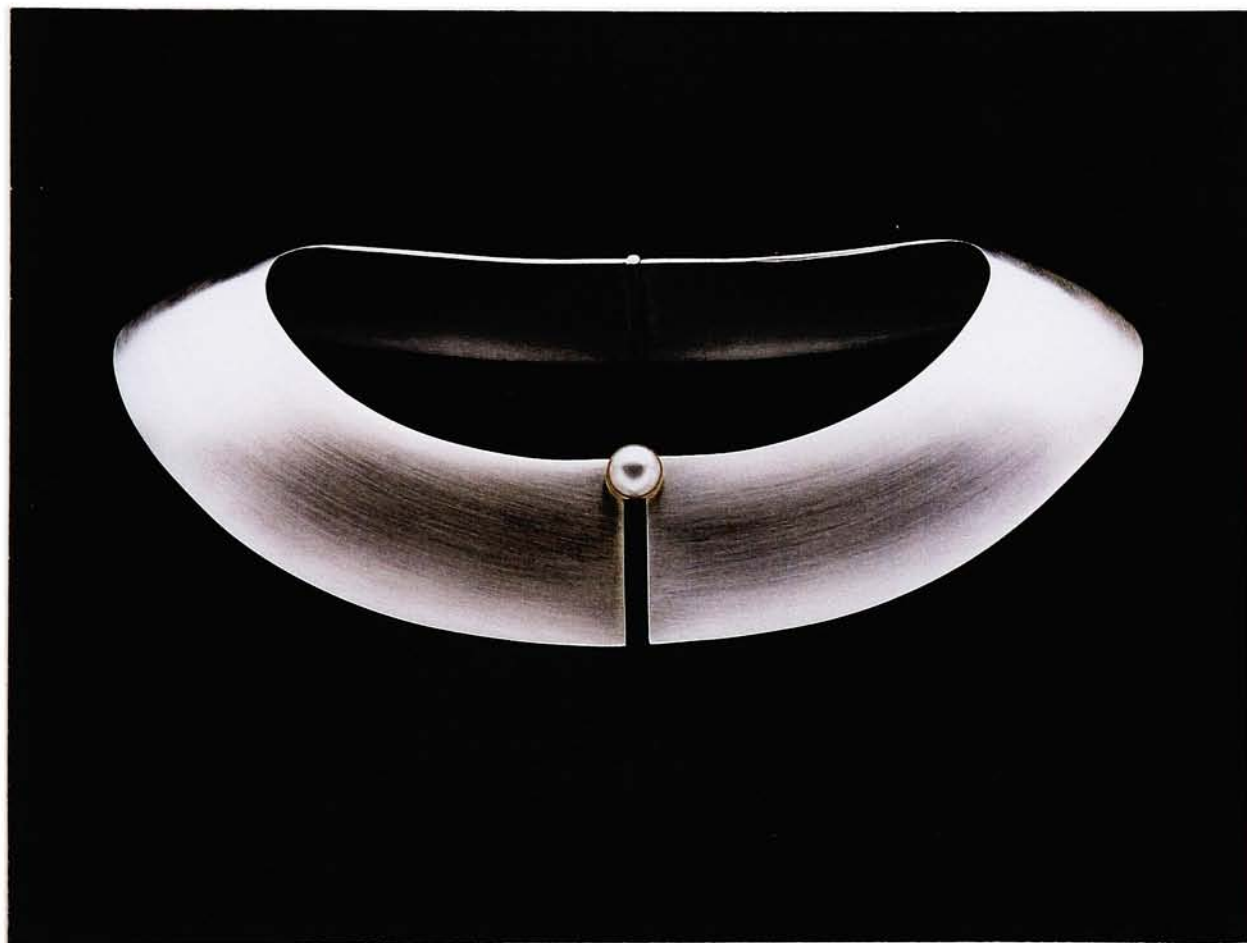
NECKPIECE ONE

illustration 1



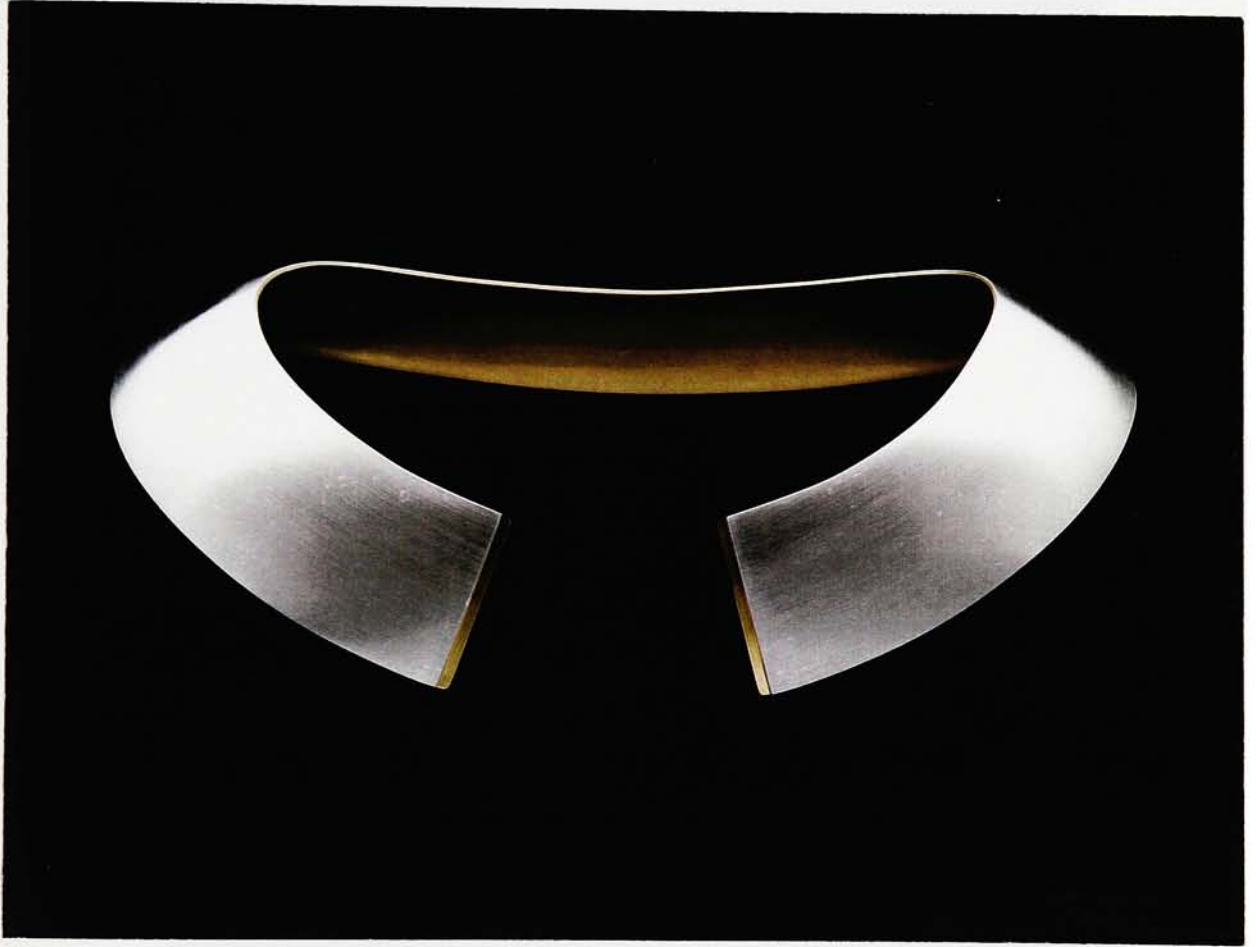
NECKPIECE TWO

illustration 2



NECKPIECE THREE

illustration 3



SPOON SERIES

illustration 4



Modernism as a Framework

The postmodernism of the late 80's early 90's has suggested that everything must have meaning. The result has been an overabundance of ornamentation, color, texture and pattern. From the fashion industry to architecture, the symbols of today have become anachronistic clichés, insipid expressions continually regenerated and mass produced. Much of today's environment is the result of a backlash against modernism whose minimalism went hand in hand with a machine aesthetic. The premise of my thesis was to return to the restraint of modernism but with a more humanistic sensibility. I suggested in my thesis statement that pure, simple, clean design, devoid of ornamentation, (characteristics of modernism) did not have to incorporate a mass produced quality. Believing that modernism had been dismissed too quickly, I wanted to modify the existing structure of modernism instead of doing as I believe post modernism did, which was to completely wipe the slate clean.¹ In direct reaction to excess and postmodernism I intended the work to be a purely formal study.

I discovered, as my work progressed, that although I was maintaining the framework and vocabulary of modernism I was incorporating theoretical concepts of postmodernism. Postmodernism finds expression in a plethora of styles but in spite of the differences there is a common goal: the conveyance of meaning. My work became less of a reaction against the ideas of postmodernism as it was a

¹ Although the question of whether or not postmodernism is a continuum of modernism or a completely distinct style is fervently contested, I find that the abandonment of both the ideals and the vocabulary of modernism enough to warrant postmodernism's classification as a distinct new direction.

reaction against how those ideas have been expressed three-dimensionally. In other words, I found myself embracing postmodern theory but rejecting post-modern design.

I became convinced of the postmodern idiom that any successful design incorporates two elements: “function” and “poetry”. Numerous words and phrases (ritual, symbol, metaphor, external language) most popularly, “meaning”, have been used by designers in place of the word “poetry”. I have chosen to use “poetry” as it is the most abstract. It suggests that something exists beyond function but it is sufficiently ambiguous so as not to elicit a pre-determined outcome. “Meaning”, on the other hand, is the most popular term used by postmodernists and by definition *is a purposeful, intended significance or reference*. This is more than semantics as the overemphasis on “meaning” contributes to postmodern designs which are decorative, over-designed, literal, and ornamental.

In applying the concept of a balance between function and poetry to modernism, too much emphasis was put on the “machine for living”. During the modern movement the scales of function versus poetry became out of balance. Too much emphasis was placed on function, cost effectiveness, and productivity. The “poetry” side of the scale in modernism was the metaphor of the machine, but the physical realization of this metaphor did nothing more than perpetuate the over-emphasis on function.

It is important to keep the technical expression (internal language) parallel to an equal and complementary expression of ritual and symbol. It could be argued that the Modern Movement did this, that as well as its internal language, it expressed the symbol of the machine and therefore practiced cultural symbolism. But in this case, the machine is retroactive, for the machine itself is a utility. So this symbol is not an external allusion but rather a second internal reading.²

People missed the qualities of the hand, the anthropomorphic element -- that which gave the object "poetry" or emotion and therefore, cultural significance. Objects became cold and homogeneous.

It is not the quality of mass production, however, that is to blame for these characteristics, but the impetus behind the designs. Designers in this case were driven to create objects which were more functional, less costly, faster to produce and within the machine aesthetic. There was no "poetry" and ultimately the objects created were rejected by consumers. There has to be a balance. The objects in our lives are expressions of our culture and our values. In a homogeneous, anonymous design world this is lost. For instance, the International Style of the nineteen twenties and thirties created a universal style in which individual and regional identities were lost. It is a style which was ultimately rejected.

²Michael Graves, "A Case for Figurative Architecture," Buildings and Projects 1966-1981 (New York: Rizzoli, 1982), 11.

Poetry

The answer to maintaining the balance of “poetry”, however does not necessitate the creation, or in many cases regeneration, of symbols loaded with meaning, as historical postmodernism has suggested. Poetry should not have to be consciously created but should grow from design decisions. I object to the notion that poetry must be contrived or that ornamentation and symbolism make a piece more successful. Values and cultural ideals can be suggested as much by what *is not* there as what *is* there, and restraint can say far more than opulence. An object viewed in isolation is all the more powerful as a result of the removal of excess which normally surrounds it. In the sapphire ring series (illus. 5), for example, the abstract geometry of the simple circular band provides a pure, clean, unadulterated breath within which to appreciate the beauty of the stone. Within the framework of abstract geometries much can be conveyed.

The use of abstract geometries can be traced to human’s earliest creations and the exploration of the relationship between geometry and aesthetics has been well documented. Plato wrote that pure form is beautiful because it reflects the perfection of the Cosmos.³ From the Greeks’ fascination with the golden rectangle to Le Corbusier’s modular, designers throughout history have been cognizant of the connections between mathematics and beauty. Numerous psychologists have studied the relationships between geometry and aesthetics.

³ Ellen Dunham-Jones, “Art”, Lecture at the University of Virginia, September 1991.

SAPPHIRE RING SERIES

illustration 5



Studies conducted during the late 1800s and early 1900s showed empirically that individuals respond more positively to some proportions than others.⁴ It has been suggested that we unconsciously recognize proportions that strike a familial cord in the human subconscious. We find pure forms more pleasing than others because they are forms which have brought us pleasure since the origin of man (the sun, the moon, the arc of the sun, the half circle of the rainbow, the parabola of the waterfall, etc.).⁵ They are forms which are grounded in nature, mathematics, and the human psyche.

With this in mind, I am not advocating a return to Palladian design and its rigorous use of the golden section. Rather, I am suggesting that there is unequivocally an inherent sympathy (contentment) found in pure geometry. I am suggesting that “if elements accurately ascribe to mathematic proportion in their dimensions we perceive an intellectual system. Proportion and geometry transform a group of things into a lucid visual system.”⁶

However, geometry alone, as evidenced by numerous modern designs, cannot create successful designs. Geometry creates logical repetitions and recognized systems which combined with other elements have the potential to be very powerful, but on their own become monotonous and empty. Geometry operates in the abstract and is unable to convey emotions or “poetry”.

“Form is ‘what’, design is ‘how’. Form is impersonal. Design belongs to the designer. Design is a circumstantial act...form has nothing to do with

⁴ H. E. Huntley, The Divine Proportion, A Study in Mathematical Beauty (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1970), 65.

⁵ Ibid., 86.

⁶ Masao Furuyama, Tadao Ando (Zurich: Studio Paperback, 1993), 10.

circumstantial conditions.”⁷ “Poetry” grows from the process and should not be an intentional loading of symbolism as postmodernism has suggested. “...Power to inspire must remain an unforeseeable outcome of its design process. The use of stratagem to evoke our response is as transparently suspicious in architecture as slight of hand, and as disingenuous as a play.”⁸ The “poetry” and anthropomorphic element is generated by the process of design decisions and in particular develops **from the interaction between forms/ the manner in which conflict between forms is resolved, and how those forms are handled to reflect the time and place within which they were created.**

⁷ Judith Kinnard, “Louis I Kahn”, Lecture at the University of Virginia Quoting Kahn, November 1991.

⁸ Masao Furuyama, Tadao Ando (Zurich: Studio Paperback, 1993), 11.

Diversity and Conflict

In order for abstract geometries to evoke emotive power there must be present “the drama of diversity or conflict”.⁹ All of my thesis works were created within the framework of conflict: form versus interruption. The neutral background is punctuated by a moment or object. The pure geometry, abstract and unable to convey emotion, provides the neutral background which is defined by the relationship of a second geometric form. It is the interaction of these forms (the diversity, conflict, transparencies, etc.), the “didactic elaboration of form”, which give the pieces life.

The pendant series (illus. 6) is the most literal representation of the surface versus point relationship. The circle, or neutral background, acts as a filter that sets the object off from the surrounding chaos: it isolates the object from the overabundance of visual pollution. The neutral background provides a method to control the environment and take advantage of how beautiful objects are when viewed in isolation. The conflict in the piece evolves from the contrasting scale and the understanding that the object, the tiny sphere, cannot exist without its host environment, the circle. The pure circular background could function on its own, but the tiny sphere requires an environment. In this way the object becomes the intruder and thus the focus of the piece. The result is a symbiotic relationship:

⁹ Ibid., 10.

PENDANT SERIES

illustration 6



the creation of harmony from dissonance.¹⁰ The fact that the sphere has landed in a particular spot suggests the movement needed to get there.

Similarly, in the sapphire ring series (illus. 5), the bands are the neutral geometric surfaces within which the stones are embedded. In the first sapphire ring the stone is rather invasively implanted into the ring, creating the greatest conflict or tension between the two elements. As the series progresses, however, the band is still a neutral background but it is a more accommodating one: creating a particular place, or nest for its visitor. Here, a more consonant relationship exists between the two forms.

The vases (illus. 7,8,9) are less obvious examples of surface versus point, but they still draw from the same premise. In the case of vase number three the rectangular volume contributes the neutral background and the voids and transparencies, created by the square cut outs, create a form versus space interaction. Similarly, the diversity in vase number one develops from the transparencies created by the overlaying of the two spirals. The spirals, reminiscent of sine waves, or double helix, suggest movement, upward growth, and optimism.

The serving spoons (illus. 10) contrast an elliptical spoonhead with a gently curving line. On their own, each element holds limited interest, but combined their ability to evoke an emotive response is considerably heightened. The precise relationship between the very different forms significantly impacts the sentiment

¹⁰ H. E. Huntley, The Divine Proportion, A Study in Mathematical Beauty (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1970), 70.

VASE ONE

illustration 7



VASE TWO

illustration 8



VASE THREE

illustration 9



SERVING SPOONS

illustration10



conveyed. The angle of the head of the spoon, on spoon number one, for instance, contributes to the awkward elegance of the piece.

The inert nature of the form of the spoon head is contrasted with the motion and freedom of the linear handle in all three spoons of the serving spoon series. The head is the pure container receiving the object, while the handle undulates freely reflecting the curve of the hand and suggesting the movement of dining. The head has to be still while the handle is free: its only requirement that it be long enough and the proper proportions to be grasped. The anthropomorphic qualities of the spoon result not only from its reference to the curve of the human hand but by virtue of the effect the curve has on the human eye:

“...One of the gentle satisfactions enjoyed by all our ancestors, which must have left its mark on the unconscious mind, is the smooth sweep of the eye along the many quiet arcs found in nature. the smoothness of their contours is associated with the ease and comfort of the eye’s muscular effort. Jagged and jerky lines have been shown by psychologists to produce an opposite mental effect.”¹¹

¹¹ Ibid., 86.

Time and Place

The second major factor affecting poetry is the reflection of time and place. D.H. Lawrence wrote, "The business of art is to reveal the relation between man and his circumambient universe at this living moment."¹² I believe this premise holds true for design. "Creativity in our profession is measured by how well you can filter an idea according to our age."¹³ It is within this context that postmodern design's three dimensional expression of "poetry" is most concerning, and an element of post modernism to which my work is a direct reaction. From fashion's recent trend toward 1940s throwbacks to architecture's use of symbols from the past, elements we disposed of decades or centuries ago are being used to imbue meaning. "It seems society, caught in ecological crisis, withdraws its trust in progress by drawing back in discouragement from the threshold of the new, seeking instead to recapture the old and to derive security from the past."¹⁴ This regression results in banal metaphors which have little, if anything, to do with the reality of the modern world. They show a reticence on the behalf of designers to interpret forms relative to today. It exposes a laziness, a lack of spirit and optimism, and a degeneration of intellectual thought in contemporary design. Finding it easier to revert to a revival of what has been done before, many designers are not generating new interpretations.

¹² Ellen Dunham-Jones, "Art", Lecture at the University of Virginia, September 1991.

¹³ Giorgio Armani, "Numero Uno," interview by Sara Gay Forden, *W*, 1 January 1995, 53.

¹⁴ Heinrich Klotz, The History of Postmodern Architecture, trans. Radka Donnell (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988), 2.

A similar lack of discipline can be found relative to design fundamentals. A great deal can be disguised in abundant ornamentation. As reductivism and purism were replaced by ornamentation and collage, basic elements of design were lost. In this new environment, which places the greatest value on excess and hype, postmodernism has abandoned any social vision. Postmodernism lacks the moral imperative and the idealism which drove modernism and designers are not compelling themselves to think. Restraint is difficult; Excess is easy. It is disappointing that this is the one realm where postmodernism is reflecting a greater trend in society.

I feel it is necessary to address a second contemporary style here which is frequently placed beneath the postmodern umbrella but is distinct from historic postmodernism. The style is deconstructivism. (It is also a powerful literary and philosophical trend but I will only be addressing it in terms of its mainstream design influences.) The movement's origins center around Peter Eisenman, an architect and designer of jewelry and homewares, but has expanded to include a considerable following. I want to address deconstructivism because some may argue that deconstructivist design, as a branch of postmodernism, *does* reflect the time and place within which it is created by sheer virtue of the chaos and excess of the designs. Although I find it more valuable than the historic postmodern use of historic imagery, this is not an interpretation of, a reaction to, or even a reflection of society, but rather a mirror of what is going on in the modern world. Such

“mirroring” lacks the benefits of a true synthesis and interpretation of society today.

As one walks around our cities we are barraged with consumerism and superficial surface references. Each billboard, building, and window display is vying for attention. Each one is flashier than the next: it is a mad scramble for a moment of a consumer's attention.

In mainstream jewelry design the trend is toward the bigger the better, the more precious the jewels the more desirable, and the more colorful the jewels the more preferable. Nevermind that the piece is a design disaster, it emanates money and this seems to be paramount. Jewelry is increasingly divorced from aesthetics and more commonly associated with displays of wealth.

It is precisely this prolifigate consumerism and superficiality to which modern idealism and reductivism provide an appropriate response. My work was designed to contrast the chaotic reality of our lives; to create objects which are undeniably modern but not a mirror of our daily reality. In an effort to create calm, serene, and elegant objects, the designs are founded in simplicity and the basic tenants of design. They utilize a limited palette and aggressively clean lines. Somewhere during the thesis process I decided that in a world that is becoming increasingly crude and ugly one could do worse than to create beautiful objects. Modernism maintained that moral imperative: it took a stance on how design should affect

our daily lives. To abandon this, as postmodernism has chosen to do, is to kill the greatest potential of the designer.

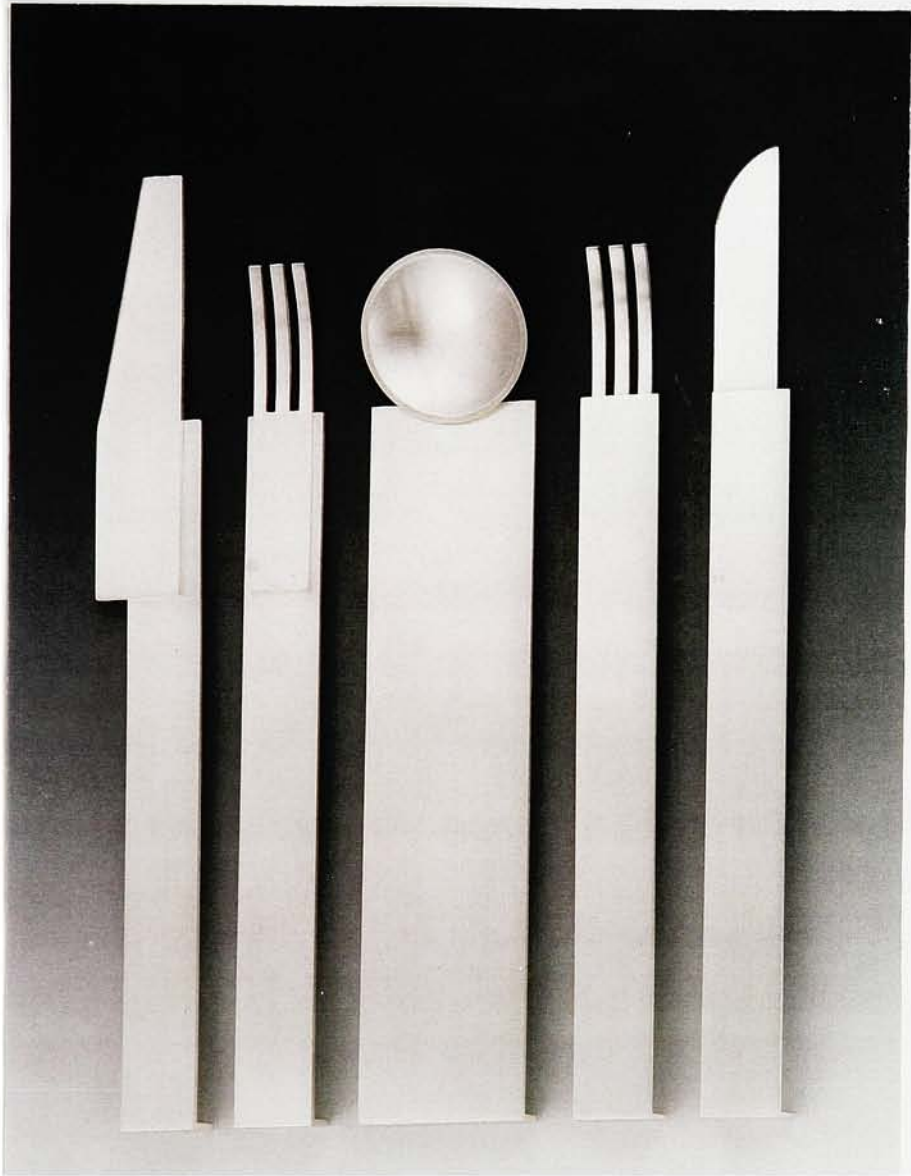
Functionalism

As function and poetry must be in balance, function played a crucial role in my designs. My flatware in particular, but also the vases, explored how far function could be pushed before it was impeded. Knowing that an obsession with functionalism was the Achilles Heel of modernism, I felt compelled early on in my thesis work to deal with the issue of functionalism. Current mass production of functionally excellent silverware has created a plethora of supremely useful but abhorrently monotonous silverware options. With all of the flatware (illus. 4,10,11) but especially with my serving spoon series the concept of how far an element can be pushed within the basic confines of function was explored. The final spoon went too far and was unusable, but it was the zone just before the spoon went too far that was the most promising. I discovered that the most intriguing designs were within the confines of functionality, but they existed on the perimeter of that realm. I am convinced that the solution to the monotony of mass produced designs is a partial renunciation of function.

I am likewise convinced that the users of products such as silverware are not nearly as preoccupied by function and efficiency as are its designers and producers. Millions of Americans each year choose to use chopsticks as opposed to silverware at Chinese restaurants. Hardly the most efficient manner for an individual

FLATWARE SERIES

illustration 11



accustomed to western utensils to transport a dumpling, but it is an emotive experience which is heightened by the use of chopsticks.

The role of function has become overstated. Are we to deem Americans so rote as to be unwilling to slightly adjust to the feel of new utensils. To accept such a position is to have a misanthropic view of society.

Many objects for the home were functionally maximized centuries ago. Phenomenal progressions in terms of functional innovation are highly unlikely. "Function exists but it is in the design areas where the potential is richer."¹⁵ Alberto Alessi uses the automobile as an example of the detriment of an overemphasis on function. Those individuals responsible for the design of cars are not so much interested in the design potential of the automobile as they are obsessed with the notion of designing faster and more efficient cars. The consequences are uninspired cars which look increasingly homogeneous. Yet regardless of a car's potential speed, the reality for consumers in the United States is crowded roads and speed limits of 65 mph. Despite advances in performance, we cannot go any faster than we could go in our cars ten or twenty years ago.¹⁶

¹⁵Alberto Alessi, "The Design Factories," Alessi the Design Factory (London: Academy Editions, 1994), 10.

¹⁶Ibid., 11.

Alberti's Definition of Beauty

*"The harmony and concord of all the parts achieved in such a manner
that nothing could be added, taken away, or altered."*

- Leon-Battista Alberti

I had intended my thesis work to support the notion of the existence of a particular arrangement and number of elements which achieved compositional perfection. This was explored through the creation of series pieces. The two ring series in particular (see illus. 5, 12) attenuated the point. What I discovered was that the subjective nature of aesthetics made it virtually impossible to define a composition which would draw a consensus. In my opinion, within the pearl series, which explored additive and subtractive elements, the simplest ring was the closest to Alberti's definition of beauty. However, many other individuals chose one of the more complex compositions and with no apparent predictability or general agreement. Evidently the concept of a composition to which nothing can be added, taken away, or altered, lest it be destroyed, is one which can only be true for a given individual, at a given time, and cannot be treated as a universal truth.

PEARL RINGS

illustration 12



Conclusion

I have been encouraged recently by the increasing attention in the design world to a resurgence of minimalism. The proverbial pendulum may in fact be swinging back from the excesses of the past decade. I am hopeful that an increasing number of designers will find the simplicity of modernism an appropriate response to the “messy vitality” of our daily lives. The true test of minimalism this time around, however, will be to avoid the pitfalls modernism encountered years ago. Designers must learn from the past. I believe a recent article by Paul Goldberger in the New York Times eloquently defined the greatest challenge to the success of minimalism. Goldberger contrasts the newly designed Calvin Klein store by British architect John Pawson, and the recently completed Armani showroom by New York architect Peter Marino. Although both stores are examples of “modernism” there are marked differences. Goldberger writes:

“...[Mr. Marino] seems to have confused modernist simplicity with utter blandness, the building is not proportioned well, its details are poor, and it meets sky and ground with a confused indifference...There is nothing on this facade to create a sense of scale, nothing to create a sense of texture. It is as if Mr. Marino had decided that leaving off ornament was all it took to make a modern building...it is as if he is trying to prove that modernism is incapable of any richness of expression.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Paul Goldberger, “On Madison Avenue, Sometimes Less Is Less,” New York Times 27 Oct. 1996: H46.

On the other hand, Goldberger sees John Pawson's design very differently. He describes the design as "self-assured and rigorous". He writes:

"...Mr. Pawson understands the essence of minimalism, which is not just a matter of eliminating things but of distilling what remains into something as close to perfection as possible...The silences, the spaces in between - the space that is not filled up with something are the silences that tell as much as the words...You do feel that you are in the presence of design that demonstrates with consummate intelligence the virtues of simplicity, and that communicates a sense of belief."¹⁸

It is precisely this "essence of minimalism" which Goldberger describes which will determine whether modernism is successful or fails. Minimalism is about so much more than a removal of ornamentation. It relies on fundamentals such as proportion, attention to detail and discipline. Throughout my thesis work I have attempted to avoid the cold machine aesthetic of the early modernists and instead create work that maintained a humanistic sensibility. I am encouraged by designers such as Pawson, that my work has relevance in our society of excess, and that my future design work will be part of a larger trend toward a new humanistic modern aesthetic.

¹⁸ Ibid., H46.

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